

## HOW TRUE IS "THE CROWN" ON THE SUEZ COVER-UP?

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**In the hit show, Queen Elizabeth II puts the British prime minister in check for his secret plan to attack Egypt. In real life, he was checkmated by David Ben-Gurion.**

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As 2017 turned into 2018, the entertainment press in America and Britain suddenly began to run articles explaining the Suez crisis of 1956.

“Where is the Suez Canal?,” asked a headline in the British tabloid *Daily Express*, and “Why did Britain Go to War over it in 1956?” “When was the Suez Crisis,” quizzed a headline in *The Sun*, another British tabloid, with the subhead: “Which Countries were Involved and Why did it Cost Prime Minister Anthony Eden his Job?” “Did the Suez Crisis Really Happen?” wondered a headline at the New York-based *Romper*, a popular website for millennial mothers.

The explanation for this sudden surge of interest may be found in another headline, from *Refinery29*, an American mega-website aimed at young women. Among articles on fashion and food, there appeared this item: “What is the Suez Crisis & Why do I Need to Know About it to Watch *The Crown*? ”

*The Crown*, for those who don’t subscribe or aren’t royal-watchers, is a Netflix costume drama depicting the life of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II. It is also the most expensive television



Netflix.

series ever made (price tag to date: \$130 million). The second season of *The Crown* began streaming in December, and the early episodes are set in 1956, as the Suez crisis unfolds and British politics unravel.

No doubt, most binge watchers of *The Crown* were as blissfully ignorant of the Suez crisis as of the Hundred Years' War. But no longer. If war is God's way of teaching Americans geography, Hollywood-style biopics must be His way of teaching them history. And, truth be told, not even the most gifted historian could possibly rekindle an interest in the Suez crisis of 1956. That could only come out of a gleaming headquarters on Sunset Boulevard, and we should be grateful for it.

But it is precisely in such circumstances that historians begin to sharpen their pencils. Just how accurate is the account? The historical consultant to *The Crown* is the British journalist Robert Lacey, the author of many popular histories and biographies on subjects ranging from King Henry VIII to the American gangster Meyer Lansky. Lacey is perfect for the role because for him, as one profile has noted, "there can be truth without fact." Even when all evidence has disappeared, he holds that it's possible to recreate events and even conversations "[t]hrough empathy, through imagination, through the psychology of characters. I've come to see that is just as valid as the dry documentation."

***The Crown* tests** this proposition repeatedly. Here I'll consider one prime example, from the episode entitled "Misadventure," the first installment of the new season. It features an especially riveting conversation that takes place at Buckingham Palace between the Queen (played by Claire Foy) and Britain's prime minister, Anthony Eden (Jeremy Northam). The date: October 30, 1956.

Here's a quick refresher, for the context.

The previous July, Egypt's ruler, Gamal Abdel Nasser, nationalized the Suez Canal Company, which had been largely British-owned since 1875. Eden is now determined to get it back and dispose of the troublesome Egyptian, but he doesn't want to act alone or seem to be clawing back a piece of empire. So he has joined with France and Israel, each of which has its own score to settle with Nasser, to run a plot.

First, Israel will invade the Sinai and threaten the Suez Canal. Then, Britain and France will issue an ultimatum to both Israel and Egypt to back away from the Canal and allow them to deploy forces to protect it. Finally, when Egypt rejects the ultimatum, Britain and France will seize the Canal by force. Everyone will be fooled into thinking Britain has acted responsibly in the interests of peace, when in fact it will have instigated a war as a pretext for intervention.

(Spoiler alert: the Americans won't be fooled for a moment and won't like it one bit; at their insistence, Britain will be forced to leave Suez with its lion's tail between its legs.)

As prime minister, Eden regularly briefs his sovereign, usually on Tuesdays. And so, on the day before the intervention, he arrives at the palace to bring the Queen up to speed. He, formerly Churchill's foreign secretary, is a wily politician and an old policy hand. She, fairly new in her job, hasn't much understanding of foreign affairs. Earlier in the episode, however, she's been forewarned by her distant cousin, Lord Louis Mountbatten (Greg Wise), First Sea Lord, that Eden is pursuing an irrational vendetta against Nasser. That has prompted her to do her homework and to read Eden's own briefing to the cabinet of October 23. There he'd said that it "seemed unlikely that the Israelis would launch a full-scale attack against Egypt."

Eden enters, and is received by Her Majesty.

PM: Events are unfolding at great speed.

Queen: Do sit down, Prime Minister.

PM [now seated]: In the early hours of this morning the Israeli army launched an attack into Egyptian territory, the Sinai Peninsula, and is rapidly approaching the Suez Canal. The Egyptian army has mobilized a retaliatory force and is about to engage. Her Majesty's government has now issued a deadline to both Israel and Egypt to halt all acts of war . . . and to allow Anglo-French forces into the country to preserve the peace. The Israelis have expressed a willingness to comply if the Egyptians do, but alas . . . President Nasser has thus far refused.

Queen: When does the deadline expire?

PM: Tomorrow morning, ma'am.

Queen: And the next step, in your view, would be?

PM: Military intervention, ma'am.

Queen: War?

PM: Indeed. But to keep the peace. [Sits back and crosses his legs, with an air of self-satisfaction.] It is the correct thing to do, ma'am. Nasser is playing roulette with the stability of the whole world.

Queen: Well. . . . Thank you for your explanation.

[Eden rises and begins to leave.]

Queen [unexpectedly]: Before you go, I do have one or two questions. [Eden, off guard, stops and turns.] When you mentioned that the Israelis had launched an attack, you didn't seem surprised.

PM [flustered]: Why *would* I seem surprised?

Queen: Unless I'm mistaken, the Israeli position has always been that they would, under no circumstances, launch a full-scale attack by themselves for fear of diplomatic isolation. And yet they've gone on to do precisely that, indicating that either they changed their mind, or . . . there'd been some kind of collusion. Have we?

PM: Have we . . . what?

Queen: Colluded with Israel? In any way?

[Eden hesitates and casts his eyes downward; cutaway to the clacking keys of a typewriter.]

PM [reluctantly]: Six days ago, this government met with representatives of the French and Israeli governments in a small village on the outskirts of Paris, where a document was signed [cutaway to men in topcoats shaking hands at the entrance to an imposing château]. The Sèvres Protocol [cutaway to a lighter setting a document aflame; the paper is consumed by fire], which outlines plans for a coordinated offensive against Egypt, whereby the Israeli army would attack the Egyptian army near the Suez Canal, thus allowing the intervention of Anglo-French forces [cutaway to a group in the château drinking a champagne toast; a hand lays a champagne cork on a table next to Eden back in London; he takes it and a look of satisfaction crosses his face].

Queen: Who else knows about this?

PM: Individual members of cabinet. Senior members.

Queen: But not Parliament?

PM [alarmed]: No.

Queen: Or the United Nations? [Eden is silent.] When does all this begin?

PM: Airstrikes begin tomorrow.

Queen: You don't want to give it more time?

PM [stiffens with conviction]: No, ma'am. The right thing to do is to go in now, and to go in hard. I was right about Mussolini. I was right about Hitler, and I am right about this fella! Do I have your support?

[The Queen stares at Eden with a mixture of disbelief and disappointment. She rises.]

Queen [resignedly]: The Prime Minister always has the sovereign's support.

PM [stiffly]: Your Majesty. [Eden takes his leave.]

This is a gripping scene, made all the more compelling by fine acting. It is also entirely conjectural. Eden did meet with the Queen during the crisis, but neither of them ever gave a public account of their privileged conversations. The scene isn't a reenactment, it's a speculation.

And it's not a new technique. Peter Morgan, the writer of *The Crown*, is the author of an earlier 2013 play, *The Audience*, made up entirely of what he called "imagined" conversations between the Queen and a succession of prime ministers. (New York theatergoers might recall that Helen Mirren received a Tony for her role as the Queen in the play's 2015 Broadway production.) The "imagined" conversation with Eden in *The Crown* is directly descended from the (longer) version in *The Audience*. And as in the play, so in the film, the conversation has been meticulously constructed to serve a very precise narrative purpose.

First, it accurately conveys to the viewer the basics of the three-way "collusion" over Suez. Second, it is intended to suggest that the Queen had doubts about the whole venture, a point that historically remains a matter of dispute. But third, and most intriguingly, it argues that Eden was so obsessively secretive that he would have deceived even his sovereign. Only after she directly insists that he tell the truth does he grudgingly reveal it.

Was Anthony Eden *that* devious? Supporting evidence for the possibility is hinted at in the cutaway image of the burning copy of the Sèvres Protocol—the secret, signed agreement among Britain, France, and Israel. Here lies the advantage of film over stage: it's easy to insert a subliminal hint. In *The Crown*, Eden admits to the "collusion," but he seems to keep a darker secret—namely, that he has destroyed the evidence for it.

Here also lies a tale, and at its center is David Ben-Gurion. In *The Crown*, the Queen puts Sir Anthony in check. But in real life it was Ben-Gurion who checkmated him.

**On the afternoon** of October 22, 1956, a French plane, coming from a military airbase in Israel, landed at a military airport on the outskirts of Paris. Four Israelis emerged: Ben-Gurion, Israel's prime minister and defense minister; Shimon Peres, director-general of the Defense Ministry; Moshe Dayan, IDF chief of staff; and Mordechai Bar-On, Dayan's young chef de bureau. Their mission: to conclude a secret negotiation with their French and British counterparts on combined action against Egypt's Nasser.

The talks took place, far from prying eyes, at a private villa in the Paris suburb of Sèvres. (*The Crown* places the meeting in an imposing château, but one of the French participants later described the villa, which had been a Resistance safe house under the Nazi occupation, as "awfully common.") The story of the talks has been told many times in memoirs and historical studies.

The crux of the matter was that the French had to broker a deal between the Israelis and the British, the weakest side of the triangle. At the time, Israel and France, drawn together by shared interests, were already racing toward a full-blown alliance. But “when Ben-Gurion went to Sèvres,” Bar-On has recalled, “his heart was full of suspicion, humiliation, and anger toward Britain” over its treatment of the yishuv during the Mandate period. For its part, Britain still had defense agreements with two of Israel’s enemies, Jordan and Iraq, and because of its Arab interests had always been keen to avoid any open hint of association with Israel. Thus, Eden himself didn’t attend the Sèvres talks but instead sent his foreign secretary, Selwyn Lloyd, whom Dayan found “antagonistic. His whole demeanor expressed distaste—for the place, the company, and the topic.” Peres described Lloyd as “a dry martini full of ice.”

The negotiations soon faltered, but were rescued thanks largely to the perseverance of the French. The major breakthrough came after the French foreign minister, Christian Pineau, rushed off to London in the middle of the negotiations to meet Eden personally. For the decisive round of talks, Eden replaced Lloyd with Patrick Dean, a secretive go-between who chaired something called the Joint Intelligence Committee. Donald Logan, Lloyd’s private secretary, was the only British official in attendance throughout.

The understanding finally reached by all sides ran along the lines briefly summarized in *The Crown*. But there then occurred something that would shadow Eden ever after.

Ben-Gurion held the key to the success of the negotiation, and he held it close. Letting Dayan work out a compromise with the British and French, he withheld his own consent until the last minute. And then it came with a condition: “We will have to draw up a protocol of the negotiations to be signed by us all and which will be binding on the parties.”

Ben-Gurion wanted a written agreement. Information had reached him “from a very well-placed source” (Peres would recall) that “Britain’s assurances were not to be relied upon,” and that “at the last moment Britain might yet turn its back on us.” And so “no wink-and-nod arrangement would satisfy Ben-Gurion.”

Had Eden been present at the table, he might have managed to brush this matter aside. “No need, you have my word of honor”—and that might have deflected Ben-Gurion. After all, Eden had resigned as foreign secretary in 1938 over Neville Chamberlain’s “appeasement” of Mussolini, and had a reputation for probity. But in this case he had dispatched unknown bureaucrats in his stead, among whom, as Ben-Gurion knew, none had the standing to deny him his formal agreement.

So he got it. Here is Ben-Gurion’s diary entry:

After clarifying all the points, I proposed that we draw up a protocol of these conclusions which would be signed by the three sides and approved by the three governments. This was accepted, and six—two from each side—promptly sat down

to formulate the conclusions. . . . The minutes were edited in French—we signed them—each one signed three copies.

Lloyd's substitute, Patrick Dean, later claimed that the protocol actually appeared out of the blue:

A paper was suddenly produced from the next room where it had apparently been very recently typed. . . . [Donald] Logan and I had not expected this as we had been proceeding on the basis that the discussions were to be oral and that I should be reporting orally on them to the prime minister on my return to London. We discussed whether we ought to sign the paper as I was asked to do. We considered consulting London by telephone but recognized that apart from the security risk involved, to do so would certainly increase the suspicion of British intentions.

Logan, too, would recall being surprised:

We heard the sound of typing in a neighboring room. Three copies of the protocol were produced for us, with the comment: “This is a record of what we have been discussing. Do you agree?” That was the first indication that we had that anybody intended to make a record of the conversation.

For decades to come, Dean and Logan would portray themselves as the targets of a sneak diplomatic attack, a claim repeated as fact by some historians. But Israeli testimony provides ample evidence to the contrary. According to Bar-On, the drafting committee included Pineau, Dayan, and Dean, and they spent two hours “ironing out the exact wording of the protocol. . . . Dean was an active partner in [the protocol’s] composition, and even argued over some of the wording.” Peres, in his memoirs, writes that Dean and Logan “haggled with us and the French over the wording.” Dayan would recall “heavy going,” in part because Dean insisted that a customary preamble be included whose content turned into a sticking point. (“It got immediately tangled in half-philosophical questions,” writes Bar-On.) At Dayan’s urging, the preamble was finally dropped altogether, and the protocol opened straightforwardly with the operative clauses.

Perhaps what took Dean and Logan aback was the Israeli and French insistence that the protocol be *signed*. Even so, the two British negotiators certainly didn’t regard a written protocol as anything out of the ordinary. Dean believed it would “enable me to make an accurate report to the prime minister on the precise intentions of the other two governments (and the prime minister clearly wanted as much precision as possible about Israeli intentions).” In a 1991 interview, Logan said, forthrightly: “It seemed to me that to have a record of what had been discussed during those days which was precise and accurate was better than to have nothing.”

If the record was accurate, moreover, why not sign it? Eden hadn’t instructed Dean to do

otherwise. “I judged that the plan of action contemplated fell within the prime minister’s instructions to me,” concluded Dean, and “I accordingly initialed each page of the document and signed at the end, and the French and the Israelis did the same.”

So Ben-Gurion, Dean, and Pineau initialed and signed the protocol, and each signatory took a copy. According to Bar-On, “Ben-Gurion was glad to have the agreement in writing as an extra reassurance against last-minute defection by the British.” Or more than glad: as Bar-On also recalls, “Ben-Gurion, who could hardly hide his excitement, took the protocol in his hand, as if holding a fragile treasure, folded it and stuck it in his waistcoat pocket.” Dayan: Ben-Gurion “read and reread the articles in the plan with scrupulous care, knitting his brow in furious concentration and murmuring each word to himself. He then neatly folded the paper and placed it in the inside pocket of his jacket.”

Ben-Gurion had exactly what he wanted—and something unprecedented in the history of the young state of Israel: a signed military pact with two great powers. True, he couldn’t announce it. One of its provisions (paragraph six) stated explicitly that “the arrangements of the present protocol must remain strictly secret.” Even so, the formally written and signed document meant the world to him. It was, in Bar-On’s words,

a kind of promissory note against the danger of fraud by “Perfidious Albion.” It was a decisive guarantee against any possibility that Britain would betray and double-cross Israel.

That evening, the Israelis boarded a plane home to set the military operation in motion.

Patrick Dean and Donald Logan also left, “mumbling words of politeness” (Dayan), and headed straight that evening to No. 10 Downing Street to inform Eden of the done deal. Contrary to *The Crown*, Dean didn’t place a champagne cork on Eden’s desk. (At Sèvres, the French and the Israelis raised a toast only after the British had left.) Instead, he gave Eden the signed protocol.

**The word** used to describe Eden’s response to receiving the signed protocol has varied from one telling to the next. In 1978, Dean filed this confidential account:

When I handed the document to Sir A. Eden and explained what had happened he clearly was surprised because he had not expected any written document. . . . [He] was not very pleased.

But in 1986 Logan described to an Eden biographer a much harsher reaction:

Eden was furious that a document had been produced. . . . We justified our action by saying that it was normal and prudent diplomatic practice to put into agreed

written form conversations of such detail and importance. . . . He would have none of it, maintaining that we ought to have realized that it was essential for him that nothing should be written down.

In a 1991 interview, Logan added that Eden had been “horrified that anything had been put on paper.” “Oh my God,” he is supposed to have said. “I never expected anything to be signed!”

Eden then issued an astonishing order, one even more personally revealing than the “collusion” itself. According to Dean, Eden instructed him to return to Paris the very next morning and ask the French “to destroy [their copy of] the document which I had signed the day before.” The mission, as Logan recalled it, was “to persuade Pineau to destroy the record.”

And so Dean and Logan set off the next day on one of the most humiliating missions in the annals of modern diplomacy. At the French foreign ministry, Pineau received their request “coldly” but promised to consider it, and then kept them in a locked reception hall for over four hours with nothing on the table but mineral water. When they next saw him, he rejected their request—partly, he told Dean, because

the Israelis already had a third copy of the document in Israel and partly because the French saw no reason to destroy the document. From the way they spoke both Logan and I got the clear impression that they distrusted the motives behind the prime minister’s request and suspected that the real reason for it was that the prime minister might find it easier and more convenient to deny that there had been any previous planning or to refuse to act in accordance with the contingency plan, if it suited him, if no written documents existed in Paris or London.

At some point, if not that very day, the French informed the Israelis of this attempt by Eden to destroy the evidence. Ben-Gurion must have felt vindicated for having insisted on a signed protocol—in three copies.

And what of the British copy? *The Crown*, in the midst of its rendition of Eden’s audience with the Queen, cuts away to a document being consumed by flames. Did Eden destroy the protocol, or have it destroyed? Since it never resurfaced, that’s the prevailing assumption. Logan was sure of it, as he explained in an interview many years later:

I always concluded that our copy of the original document which we had given to Eden would be destroyed, since that’s what he wanted everybody else to do. And sure enough, when the 30 years had elapsed after which the British documents are made public, the Foreign Office were concerned that they could not find it and asked me where it was. I told them I was sure they could stop looking for it because they would never find it. . . . I’m quite certain that our copy of the Sèvres document had been destroyed.

When it happened is anyone’s guess. After Dean and Logan failed to get the French copy, Eden

ordered all copies and translations at the Foreign Office to be delivered to No. 10. A few weeks after the Suez debacle, he appeared before the House of Commons: “I want to say this on the question of foreknowledge and to say it quite bluntly to the House, that there was not foreknowledge that Israel would attack Egypt—there was not.”

This was a bald lie. Immediately afterward, as witnessed by Edward Heath (then the government chief whip in the Commons), Norman Brook, the cabinet secretary, rushed from a meeting with Eden,

looking like an old Samurai who had just been asked to fall on his sword. We paused, as Brook said, “He’s told me to destroy all the relevant documents. I must go and get it done.” With that, Sir Norman, loyal as always to his prime minister, went off to destroy the Sèvres Protocol and other documents which confirmed the collusion of Britain, France, and Israel over Suez.

Someone once told Brook that “one day presumably the whole truth would emerge.” Brook’s response: “Damned good care has been taken to see that the whole truth never does emerge.”

The destruction probably included Dean’s notes from Sèvres. Logan would later maintain that he and Dean kept no record, but he had to admit that this might seem “somewhat unbusinesslike.” In fact, for a seasoned official, it would have been unthinkable. As it happens, Bar-On records that Dean “took meticulous notes in his little copy book with a sharpened pencil,” writing down “every word.” Most likely, Eden or Norman Brook would have asked for notes of the meeting, and they went the way of the protocol.

**Eden resigned** in January 1957, the prime casualty of the Suez war, and proceeded to write his memoirs. Yet even as revelations from many sources (initially, French and Israeli) made the “collusion” a matter of common knowledge, Eden continued to insist that no such agreement had ever existed. In *Full Circle* (1960), the first volume of his memoirs, he stuck doggedly by his story. Britain had gone into Suez to preserve the peace; he had no certain knowledge of Israel’s war plan.

He could hold this line honorably only in the absence of the Sèvres Protocol, which made it fortunate for him that the other two copies didn’t surface. Pineau and Dayan both summarized the protocol in memoirs, in considerable detail. But Pineau and Ben-Gurion adamantly refused to show their copies to anyone.

In the 1960s, Pineau greeted the journalist Kennett Love’s request to see his copy by indicating that it had been preserved, but “he told me sharply that I would not be able to see it.” Some years later, Pineau feigned ignorance when Logan inquired into the whereabouts of the French original. Only one page was found in his papers after his death; the rest had disappeared.

Ben-Gurion, too, held firm, despite the gradual accumulation of Israeli testimony about the Sèvres negotiations. Bar-On, after leaving public service, wanted to publish his own account, but Ben-Gurion nixed it. He felt no particular loyalty to Eden, to whom “I owe nothing,” but had pledged himself to secrecy and was bound by his word.

Ben-Gurion also believed that keeping the protocol secret gave him valuable leverage over Eden. Indeed, in the weeks after the Suez debacle, the British prime minister sent him a warm personal message suggesting they might soon meet. In his 1960 memoir, Eden praised Ben-Gurion’s “combination of brilliant courage and firmness,” and also fully justified Israel’s preemptive action: “The marked victim of the garrotter is not to be condemned if he strikes out before the noose is round his throat.”

Ben-Gurion had an explanation for Eden’s refreshing pro-Israel stance, telling a *New York Times* correspondent in 1968 that “Eden sent over to Paris after the affair in order to have all the original documents destroyed. But he found that I had copies. And I may note that it was only then that he became friendly to Israel.”

As evidence, Ben-Gurion cited his visit to London in 1965 for the funeral of Winston Churchill:

When we got close to the cathedral, I saw from across the street the entire top British ranks surrounding the Queen. Anthony Eden was also among the group, but he suddenly saw me from across the street. He suddenly bowed to the Queen, crossed the street, approached me, and warmly and emotionally shook my hand in front of everyone. The fact that the [former] prime minister of Great Britain would leave Her Majesty, even for a moment, in order to shake the hand of David ben Avigdor from Plonsk is a great act, an asset of the first degree for Israel, and one we must not harm.

So Ben-Gurion refused to allow the release of the Sèvres Protocol. “We can consider it only after Eden’s death,” Ben-Gurion told Bar-On, but “as long as he lives we must not trip him up.” According to Eden’s biographer Robert Rhodes James, Ben-Gurion assured Eden personally that, as far as the state of Israel was concerned, Sèvres would always remain a secret.

Eden died in 1977, Ben-Gurion four years earlier, leaving Shimon Peres the “guardian” of the protocol. In 1996, as prime minister, Peres permitted its release in response to a request by a British documentary film team. (Even then, he insisted on their procuring the prior agreement of the French and British governments.) Finally arriving at the Ben-Gurion Archives in Sde Boker, the film crew found only a faded photocopy preserved in a sealed envelope in a safe. Ben-Gurion’s original was lost.

By this time, of course, it no longer mattered. The secret document had long ago served its and his purpose. By maneuvering the parties into actually signing the Sèvres Protocol, Ben-Gurion had opened the way for a military victory that transformed the perception of Israel.

The Suez war was a disaster for Britain, but the Sinai campaign was a triumph for Israel, giving it, until June 1967, a decade of quiet on its troubled Egyptian border.

**In the light** of all this, is the scene of Eden's audience with the Queen in *The Crown* more credible, or less? Was Eden so secretive that he might indeed have lied to his sovereign?

To the second question, the answer is: quite likely, yes—given the lengths to which he went to destroy evidence of the “collusion.” Nor can it be certain that the Queen managed to squeeze the truth from him as she does in *The Crown*. It's hard to find fault with the assessment of the historian Philip Murphy in his *Monarchy and the End of Empire*:

We cannot be at all confident that Eden would have been absolutely candid with the Palace about the level of collusion. Nor is it clear, despite the large quantity of documents to which the Queen potentially had access, that they would have revealed the full extent of the conspiracy.

No, we cannot be confident—because *the* document had been marked for destruction.

Indeed, the most far-fetched segment of Eden's audience in *The Crown* is his explicit mentioning of the signed Sèvres Protocol. Whatever he might have told the Queen about secret understandings with Israel, it is unthinkable that he would have cited a document he had gone to such lengths to destroy. For Eden, the protocol was a mistake, the result of an in-house miscommunication. Not only did he believe it could be undone, he thought he had undone it. And if the Sèvres Protocol did not exist—well, “collusion” was a disputed matter of interpretation, not an indisputable fact. By having Eden *reveal* the existence of the protocol to the Queen, *The Crown* gives him credit for an impossible degree of candor.

As for what the Queen thought of the whole thing—the topic of most interest to royal-watchers—suffice it to say that opinion was and remains divided. Philip Murphy is probably right that “the balance of anecdotal evidence suggests strongly that she was not a supporter of the invasion of Egypt and may well have had very serious reservations about it.” Most of that anecdotal evidence came from anti-Suez courtiers, but even Eden allowed that she was “not pro-Suez.”

Yet in *The Crown* the Queen doesn't express any open reservations, and the show thereby gives Eden the benefit of the doubt. She puts up rather more of a fight in *The Audience*, the stage version, where she asks Eden whether his planned invasion might be “an unjustifiable incursion into a sovereign nation to depose its leader and plunder its canal.” There's nothing comparable in *The Crown*, only the disappointed gazes she casts in Eden's direction.

Eden thus seems to have posthumously won a battle with *The Crown*'s historical consultant Robert Lacey, who many years ago published the claim (made to him by Lord Mountbatten)

that the Queen told Eden that she opposed him. Eden insisted there was “not a word of truth in this,” and even threatened Lacey with a lawsuit over it. *The Crown* neatly elides the whole question, putting the Queen’s doubts about Suez in the category of Prince Philip’s philandering: assumed, but not asserted.

**The usual view** of the Sèvres Protocol pairs it with the 1916 Sykes-Picot accord planning the post-World War I division of the Middle East: that is, two disreputable agreements devised secretly by the British and French to stifle Arab nationalist aspirations. But from an Israeli point of view, the Sèvres Protocol is best understood as the sequel to the 1917 Balfour Declaration.

In the Balfour Declaration, the British, with the consent of France (as I’ve [noted](#) previously in *Mosaic*), recognized the right of the Jewish people to a “national home” in Palestine. In the Sèvres Protocol, France and Britain recognized the Israeli right to defend that home against threats, even if that meant preemptive war. The Balfour Declaration inaugurated an alliance of Zionism with Britain, which initially protected the yishuv through its most vulnerable period until it could defend itself. The Sèvres Protocol inaugurated an alliance of Israel with France, which then fortified the young state with advanced weaponry to guarantee its future survival.

But there is also a fundamental difference between the two documents. The Balfour Declaration was issued *to* the Zionists who formed what we’d now call a “non-state actor.” Chaim Weizmann was waiting *outside* the cabinet room for the declaration to be issued. The Sèvres Protocol was signed *by* Israel, a sovereign state on a par with the other two signatories, both (at the time) major powers. Ben-Gurion was *inside* the room, seated at the same table. This is why he regarded the signing as such a triumph. Since independence in 1948, his Israel, a small country of fewer than two million people, had struggled more or less alone in the world. The Sèvres Protocol attested that it belonged in the same league as the major powers.

Later, again with France’s help, Israel entered an even more exclusive club. It was at Sèvres that Ben-Gurion sent Shimon Peres to approach Pineau and the French defense minister, Maurice Bourgès-Maunoury, to ask them for a nuclear reactor and uranium. To the astonishment of Peres, they agreed.

The main flaw of the Sèvres Protocol was that, unlike the Balfour Declaration, it didn’t have American buy-in. Initially, Ben-Gurion had insisted that the Americans be informed in advance; Eden thought he could win their understanding after the fact. Not so. As I suggested early on (and as Michael Doran has recently narrated in *Ike’s Gamble*), Eisenhower was outraged, and set out to punish Eden and subordinate Britain to America’s strategy. Suez marked the end of the road for Britain in the Middle East.

But for Israel, it was the beginning. In 1948, Israel had won a war within Palestine; in 1956, it proved its ability to strike effectively well beyond its borders, taking Gaza and Sinai and then trading them a year later for American guarantees. This was the start of Israel's strategic dominance in the Middle East, a position it would consolidate ten years later in the Six-Day War.

So it really is too bad that all of the originals of the Sèvres Protocol have gone missing, though fortunately an Israeli photocopy did survive, and a copy of that copy has even been placed in the relevant file in the British National Archives.

True, the protocol has none of the grandeur of a great document of the sort taught to schoolchildren or read for inspiration. It has no lofty preamble and proclaims no noble principles. And for those whose interests it harmed, it is the “smoking gun” of dishonor.

But the Sèvres Protocol must go down as one of Ben-Gurion's last great moments. He was past his prime, the oldest man at the table, dependent on Dayan and Peres to work out the details. But he hadn't lost his political cunning, and he perceived that the expert mandarin sent from London wouldn't resist signing his name next to his own. Those three affixed signatures, British, French, and Israeli, give the document its redeeming dignity. In *The Crown*, the Sèvres Protocol burns. But it was not consumed.